

Rewriting Ethiopian History

Christopher Clapham

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Christopher CLAPHAM

Introduction: the familiar tale of Ethiopian history

'History' is the story of the past, told from the perspective of the present. As the present changes, history changes with it, because even if the past is, in one sense, entombed beyond the possibility of alteration, the constantly changing present leads us to ask different questions about it, and to put it together in ways that seek to make sense not only of the past, but of ourselves and our present predicaments. Sometimes this changing quest may be guided by explicitly political agendas – like the attempt of the European Union to rewrite the history of Europe, but from the viewpoint of integration, rather than of national state formation, or the construction of African histories as the tools of 'nation-building' exercises designed for the classrooms of newly independent states. Often, it simply reflects different ways of looking at the past, which themselves derive from the ideas that we are currently using to make sense of the present; Marxist historiography is a case in point. But everywhere, history changes.

But to this trite generalisation, Ethiopia appears to be a striking exception.¹ Ethiopia itself has changed dramatically over recent decades, through the decline and fall of the old imperial system, to the massive upheavals of the early years of revolution, the attempt to construct a Marxist-Leninist state, the growth of regional resistance movements, and most recently the independence of Eritrea and the transformation of the rest of Ethiopia's political structure into a system of ethnic federalism. Changes in Ethiopian culture and society have been equally great. Yet the historiography of Ethiopia has for the most part remained quite astonishingly immune to upheavals that might well have been expected to make us look at Ethiopia in ways very different from those that convention has established. Despite extensive criticisms of this conventional historiography which are discussed later in this paper, when we pick up a History of Ethiopia, even the most recent, we know broadly what to expect.² Starting perhaps with a ritual

¹ This paper was completed before I had seen any but an early, and subsequently much changed, text of Alessandro Triulzi, "Battling with the Past: New Frameworks for Ethiopian Historiography, in Wendy James & al., eds, *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism & After* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002, pp.276-88). Remarkably, given our very similar subject matter, this overlaps very little with the present paper; and I can strongly recommend it as a very sensitive study of the problems of writing Ethiopian history at this time.

² See, for example, Paul Henze, *Layers of Time: a history of Ethiopia* (London: Hurst, 2000); Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: a history* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). For earlier versions of essentially the same tale, see A.H.M. Jones & Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935); Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia* (London: Faber, 1948); Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: an introduction to country and people* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).

obseisance to the emergence of possibly the earliest hominids in what is now Ethiopian territory, it will then chronicle the Axumite state and the introduction of Christianity; the decline of Axum and the Ethiopian 'dark ages' will be followed by an account of the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, and the golden age that followed the Solomonic 'restoration'; at that point, outsiders enter the story, with the *jihad* of Ahmad Gragn and the arrival of the Portuguese, while the Oromo tide flows up from the south, into Shoa, Wollo, and even parts of Tigray; this results in a further period of decline, lit by the decadent glories of Gondar, until Ethiopia is almost extinguished during the *zāmānā māsafant*; however, this proves to be only the darkest hour before the dawn, signalled by the rise of the terrifying Tewodros, before Yohannes and Menilek see off Egyptian and Italian invaders, extend their realm far and wide to encompass the frontiers of today's Ethiopia, and set in train the processes of modernisation in the form of Western-style education and the establishment of the beginnings of a bureaucracy; there remains only the brief incident of *Lij* Iyasu, the relentless rise of Tafari (soon to become Haile-Selassie), fascist invasion, the *arbāññoç* and liberation, the Eritrean federation, and the consolidation of a modern centralised state, until the dramatic transformations of the revolution lead to the peripheral nationalisms of Eritrea and Tigray, and the overthrow of the Mengistu regime. The rest, as they say, is history.

All this is thoroughly familiar stuff, and save for the need to update the modern end of the narrative, it has remained virtually unaltered for over half a century, while its origins go back to the first European language histories of Ethiopia, more than two hundred years ago. I have absorbed it, and in a very small way even contributed to it, myself. But the time has come to ask some fairly basic questions. What is this history? Why has it been so enormously powerful? What does it do, and what does it not do, for our understanding of Ethiopia? What, if anything, is 'wrong' with it? And most of all, is it possible to replace it, and if so, what form could the outlines of such an alternative history take? This is not to say that history must constantly be rewritten, to serve the agendas of this or that changing regime: we are entitled to expect scholars, looking back over the centuries of Ethiopia's past, to be guided by an awareness of elements that remain the same, or which change only slowly and in response to long-term developments, rather than merely reflecting current events. Nonetheless, we are in danger of finding ourselves clinging to a received version of the past, itself geared to a historical project that has ceased to have much relevance, and which may well obscure rather than illuminate those features of Ethiopia that are most important for understanding its present or seeking to make out its future.

The Allure and the Deficiencies of a Great Tradition

The history of Ethiopia just briefly outlined, even caricatured, is most obviously the history of a *state*, and the story that it tells recounts the ups and down of what is assumed to be a broadly continuous political organisation, over the space of some two thousand years. There is nothing in the least bit unusual

about that: most history is effectively state history, and has as its function the explanation of how the systems of rule under which people are currently governed have come into existence and developed over time. The emergence of new states correspondingly involves the writing of new histories, while once states have ceased to exist, their histories generally cease to be of much interest, unless they can be mined (like Periclean Athens or the Roman Empire) to provide material that can be built into the foundations of later states, or to provide an inspiration for states aspired to but as yet unborn. State history both possesses an evident 'relevance' – it tells us how we have come to be where we are now – and provides a clear storyline with more than a hint of teleology, in which the whole purpose of the past can be presented, with little difficulty, as the creation of a great design, the outcome of which we are now in a position to admire. It is likewise filled with eminently memorable individual stories, of human beings – Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I, Tewodros, Kwame Nkrumah – whose heroic activities shaped the world in which we live. Introduced into the classroom, and relayed to generations of schoolchildren, it serves as the instrument for the construction, more or less consciously and deliberately, of a sense of nationalism that will help to strengthen and preserve the state into the future.

The conventional history of Ethiopia is however much more than the history of a state, since it is immensely enhanced by being also the history of a 'great tradition', that can be presented on a par with that of other ancient civilisations, such as China or Persia. So desirable is this attribute that states like the Gold Coast or Southern Rhodesia that lacked such a tradition have felt obliged to appropriate one, in the form of Ghana and Zimbabwe. The Ethiopian version possesses all of the essential elements, including notably some impressive archaeological remains, a monarchy to provide a line of heroic rulers, an ancient Christianity that links it with the civilisations of the Mediterranean basin, and most important of all, writing.³ The sheer depth and intricacy of the Ethiopian past brings with it, too, a community of scholars whose researches combine to produce 'Ethiopian studies', which have been propagated through regular conferences since the 1950s and an academic journal. Indeed, the first and longest chapter of Ullendorff's *The Ethiopians* is devoted to a history of the academic study of Ethiopia, a format that hints at the conceptual priority of the 'construction' of Ethiopia over the actual subject matter with which it is concerned.

Any style of writing that has proved so durable as the conventional historiography of Ethiopia must clearly have a lot going for it: it has a clear theme, it tells a good story, and it integrates a very large quantity of documentary material, drawn both from outside sources and from Ethiopia itself, which is heavily

³ Noteworthy here is that Ethiopia, uniquely in sub-Saharan Africa, produced its own written history, in the form of the chronicles of successive emperors, which is itself necessarily state-centred; foreign travellers to Ethiopia were likewise overwhelmingly engaged with the state, either as diplomats who had to deal with it, or as individuals who encountered it (and even, like James Bruce, participated in it), or as missionaries and theologians concerned with an Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity that was closely associated with it. Scholars and visitors who were not concerned with the state were readily classified as anthropologists or mere travellers, whose work did not (except when they referred to the role of the Ethiopian state in the areas that they described) really 'count' as history at all.

geared to the fortunes of the Ethiopian state, and the cultural (and notably religious) underpinnings of the society that supported it. Its deficiencies, however, are equally evident, and have understandably given rise to an extensive critical literature. While much of this literature is straightforwardly polemical, and serves largely to clear the way for alternative histories which are subject to many of the same criticisms as the work that it criticises, there seem to me to be four significant charges that can justifiably be brought against the 'great tradition' history of Ethiopia.

For a start, of course, this history privileges a particular power structure, and the people associated with it. From the viewpoint of the great tradition, Orthodox Christians, and notably those who speak Amharic and Tigrinya, *are* Ethiopia, whereas other peoples merely *become part of* Ethiopia, either at times when they are incorporated within the boundaries of the modern Ethiopian state, or else when they associate themselves with that state, through conversion to Christianity, use of the Amharic language, or employment in some capacity by the state itself. Or to put it in a slightly different way, Amharas and Tigrayans have a *history*, whereas other peoples have only an anthropology, or at best a kind of sub-national sub-history that eventually gets subsumed within the national epic. It is an important fact about Ethiopia that some of the peoples within it have been far more powerful than others, and this fact both justifies giving them an important role in the story, and provides the subject matter for one of the critical elements that any history of Ethiopia must seek to explain. It is equally the case that their history is much easier to write than others' histories, and that during substantial periods of the past they stand alone, simply because we cannot find out any remotely equivalent amount of information about anyone else. But it does not entitle them to become the *only* peoples with a history, or deny us the obligation to treat other histories as fully as the sources allow, and to treat the peoples who created and experienced them on a level with those to whom 'Ethiopian history' has largely been restricted.

A second and very practical feature of 'great tradition' history is that its coverage expands and contracts with the area under the effective control of the Ethiopian empire. At its apogee, this area might (at least in the view of some historians) extend over territories that were subsequently incorporated into Somalia, Djibouti, and Sudan;⁴ at its nadir, it might shrink to a small zone in the northern highlands. Huge tracts of land, and the peoples who inhabit them, form part of the story at one time, but are completely excluded from it at others. The port cities formed at the point where the plateau came closest to the Red Sea coast – Adulis, Arkiko, Massawa – which between them have provided by far the most important link between Ethiopia and the worlds of Europe, Egypt and Arabia for more than two millennia, are part of its history up to the 1550s, then excluded from it until 1952, and incorporated again until 1991; yet entirely regardless of whether they were controlled by the Axumites, the Ethiopian Empire, the Ottoman Turks, the Egyptians, the Italians, the British, the Ethiopian state (again), or an independent Eritrea, these ports have been the key to much of Ethiopia's past.

Third, 'state' history comes with a readymade teleology. The function of this

kind of history is to show how the current form of political organisation has come into being, and in the process to legitimate and even glorify it. History – and virtually all national histories take this form – becomes a tool of state creation, and is readily co-opted by the requirements of ‘nation-building’. In the hands of many formerly colonial and newly independent states, this search for ‘a usable African past’⁵ – ‘usable’ in this sense meaning adaptable to the needs of modern state formation – readily descends into the ludicrously ahistorical appropriation of symbols, and contortion of events, to serve purposes that would have had no resonance among the actors whose deeds are thus appropriated. The creation of Ethiopian history is subject to exactly the same dangers, the ahistoricity of which is easily masked by the ‘great tradition’, which lends a fraudulent air of authenticity to the attempt to write history backwards from the needs of the present. There is nothing inevitable or historically fixed about the creation of the Ethiopian state, whether in the territorial form that it assumed between 1952 and 1991, or in that which it possessed during the first half of the twentieth century and again after 1991; on the contrary, a long view back into the Ethiopian past reminds us of the historically very variable territoriality of that state, and of the great variety of alternative political arrangements that have coexisted with it. One very useful contribution that historians can make to understanding the problems and possibilities of modern Ethiopia is precisely by reviving the histories of *difference*, and by examining the circumstances under which states of different kinds have been able, and unable, to control some or all of the diverse territories of the region.

Fourthly, then, state history imposes an emphasis on some periods, people, and places, and at the same time excludes or marginalises others. The ‘great tradition’ history of Ethiopia ‘bounces’ as it were from one episode to another, touching ground only at selected points while flying at great speed over others. The points at which it touches the ground are, inevitably, those that can be used to glorify the state: Axum, Lalibela, the medieval empire, the resistance to Roman Catholicism, and especially the creation of the modern Ethiopian state at the hands of Tewodros and Menilek. Tewodros especially – a quite extraordinary human being by any standard – owes his iconic status in Ethiopian history to his place at the pivotal moment of modern state formation. Haile-Selassie’s ambivalent position turns on whether he is to be regarded (as he attempted to portray himself) as the architect of a ‘modern’ Ethiopia, or as the expression of a crumbling feudalism consigned to the dustbin of history. Yet once the historical spotlight is shifted away from the glorification of the state – to the *zāmānā māsafānt*, for example, or to the Italian occupation – then it may illuminate themes, less heroic perhaps, that are every bit as important to understanding the underlying constituents of Ethiopia’s present.

⁴ See Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Map 3, showing the extent of ‘The Medieval Ethiopian State’.

⁵ The phrase is from Terence Ranger, ‘Towards a usable African past’, in Christopher Fyfe, ed., *African Studies since 1945: a tribute to Basil Davidson* (London: Longman, 1976); Ranger comments on the use or abuse of African history to serve the needs of narrow nationalism, or a broader sense of African racial pride.

The Search for Counter-Histories

Recently, and indeed rightly, the great tradition approach to Ethiopian history has come under increasing attack, not least as the expression of a 'manifest destiny' that encompasses the right of Christian highlanders to govern anyone over whom they could exercise control.⁶ The idea of Ethiopia that it incorporated correspondingly made a ready target for 'demythologisation' by critical theorists, who then sought to erect alternative histories on its ruins.⁷ Nonetheless, the enduring power of the great tradition is most strikingly indicated by the envy and emulation that it has attracted from its opponents, who have in turn sought to establish their own rival traditions, complete with competing 'studies' and the appropriate academic apparatus to support them. 'Somali studies' was first in the field, understandably as an adjunct to the creation of a self-consciously nationalistic Somali state, but lies a bit outside my main concerns here. The Eritrean independence struggle likewise called for the articulation of 'Eritrean studies', complete with imitative Eritrean studies conferences and *Journal of Eritrean Studies*, and serving to promote a history of Eritrea, as an entity quite separate from Ethiopia, that would legitimise the creation of an independent Eritrean state. 'Eritrean history' has thus been subordinated to exactly the same teleology of state formation as its Ethiopian counterpart, though on a far thinner empirical base. At its extreme, this has degenerated into fantasies of the kind indicated by the claim that "An independent Eritrean nation is an at least 5,000-year-old fact, recorded in Ge'ez writing on a stele in the south-central part of the country and in the fast-emerging archaeological evidence nearby of an extensive Adulite culture that predates Ethiopia's Axumite origins and even precedes ancient Egypt".⁸ It is significant, nonetheless, that the Ethiopian great tradition has become so entrenched in the construction of legitimating state ideologies in the region that the devotees of a new state should feel impelled to create a counter-tradition to accompany it.⁹

⁶ There is nothing distinctively Ethiopian about this: powerful states the world over – including, for example, England, France, Germany, Russia, Morocco, China, and the United States of America – have readily articulated their right to conquer and incorporate their neighbours; and the search for counter-histories has likewise become a universal one.

⁷ See, for example, Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: a critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Trenton, NH: Red Sea Press, 1989); Bonnie K. Holcomb & Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: the making of a dependent colonial state in northeast Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1990); John Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: struggles for history and identity the Horn of Africa* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

⁸ Charles Cantalupo, 'Ethiopia and Eritrea', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 11.01.2002, p.15. Needless to say, the stele referred to does not report the existence of any independent Eritrean nation – Eritrea itself being the creation of Italian colonialism from 1890 onwards – and the postulated five millennia of Eritrean nationhood can most plausibly be explained by the need to add a further thousand years to the four thousand commonly (and exaggeratedly) claimed on behalf of Ethiopia.

⁹ For a critique of the emergent Eritrean historiography, see Patrick Gilkes, 'Eritrea; historiography and mythology', *African Affairs* Vol.90 No.361, 1991, pp.623-8.

The most thoroughgoing attempt of which I am aware to write a counter-history of Ethiopia, from the later nineteenth century onwards, is Holcomb and Ibssa's *The Invention of Ethiopia*, which seeks to project Ethiopia, within a broadly Leninist conception of history, as 'a dependent colonial state', created in the same way and at the same time as other colonial states on the African continent, save that the incumbent 'Abyssinian' ruling class served as the agents of European colonialists, who were thus spared the need to subjugate the colonised peoples of the region themselves. In this conception, history is taken out of the hands of indigenous peoples altogether, and placed in those of a ruthlessly expanding European finance capital, in a region "strategically situated at the commercial crossroads opened between Europe and the Far East" by the construction of the Suez Canal.¹⁰ This is a project fascinatingly at variance with the attempts of historians elsewhere in the continent, and indeed within the Horn itself, to 'reclaim' their histories by emphasising the depth of the pre-colonial past (an enterprise which in Ethiopia had been pre-empted by the 'great tradition' historians), and the story of resistance to colonial conquest and government. The 'great tradition' is destroyed, in effect, along with African history as a whole. Enterprising and subversive though it is, this project is belied by the extraordinarily limited penetration of external capital into Ethiopia during the colonial epoch. The effective use of capital under African conditions – as in Kenya, Rhodesia, or most of all South Africa – required a vastly more powerful state under much closer European supervision than could be produced by tacit support of an Ethiopian empire that retained the capacity to play off different colonial powers against one another. Though the imperial expansion to the south and west was significantly influenced, as Menilek himself made clear, by colonial annexation of neighbouring territories, there was a far stronger indigenous component than Holcomb and Ibssa allow. Nor does the simplistic characterisation of the Oromo, deemed to "account for over 60 percent of the population of present-day Ethiopia",¹¹ as a colonised people come anywhere near encapsulating the complex and very varied ways in which they have been incorporated into the Ethiopian state.

The most prominent alternative line of attack has taken the form of 'Oromo studies', which can be dated to the publication of Mohammed Hassen's *The Oromo of Ethiopia* in 1990,¹² and is also expressed in a *Journal of Oromo Studies*, together with a number of other publications dedicated to the idea of Oromo as something distinct from Ethiopia. The construction of ethnonationa-

¹⁰ Holcomb & Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia*, caption to Map 1.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.3. The massive exaggeration of Oromo numbers has become a staple feature of Oromography. The percentage indicated by the 1994 census was 32.1 (*The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, Volume II Analytical Report*, Table 2.14. Addis Ababa: FRDE Office of Population and Housing Census Commission, 1999). This census excludes Eritrea, which (since Eritrea contains no Oromo) would reduce the 1990 percentage to somewhere near the 29% indicated by the 1984 census. Whatever the inadequacies of the census data, and the 1984 one certainly included some guesswork for areas of the country that the central government did not at that time control, the claimed 60+% goes way beyond any plausible total.

¹² Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: a history 1570-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

list histories is inevitably geared to specific political projects, and risks all the dangers of 'narrow nationalism' to which Ranger drew attention. In particular, it is liable to present a highly selective picture, with episodes picked out and presented – just like those of Queen Elizabeth or Joan or Arc – in such a way as to illustrate the desired message. Most remarkable in this respect is Mohammed Hassen's *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, which presents as a history of 'the Oromo' a narrative which is remarkably restricted both in time and space. An outline of Oromo pastoral origins is followed by an account of the wars between one section of the Oromo and Ennarya between 1600 and 1710, after which the four remaining chapters are devoted to the Oromo states of the Gibe region from 1800 onwards. All other Oromo communities, including those who migrated east to the Harar region and adopted Islam, those who moved west to what became Welega, and those who moved north into Shoa, Welo and Tigray, are simply ignored, as is the period between the initial migrations and the emergence of Oromo states around 1800. It is not difficult to discern, behind the process by which this restricted and in many ways anomalous group become 'the Oromo', a state constructing project that privileges a section of the Oromo people, in opposition to excluded Oromo who became Christian or Moslem, who remained within the original *gada* system, and who participated in other states (notably the Ethiopian empire and its regional sections, but also the emirate of Harar), or none. Lurking behind the history is a sense of what the Oromo ought to become.

Baxter & al.'s *Being and Becoming Oromo*¹³ constructs the idea of 'being Oromo' rather differently, with an emphasis on culture and especially on the Boran, who figure prominently in eight of the nineteen chapters; since eight others are on general topics, and only three on Oromo in other areas (one each on Welega, Shoa, and Arsi/Bale), it clearly privileges Boran as the authentic source of Oromoness, leading to a construction very different from Mohammed Hassen's earlier emphasis on states. Though the collection demonstrates some strain between the expatriate authors' concern with academic enquiry, and their Oromo colleagues' pursuit of a political project,¹⁴ it is explicitly geared to the creation of a sense of identity among Oromos, as distinct from other peoples and similar to one another, that will serve the purpose of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community'.¹⁵ Asafa Jalata's *Oromia & Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992*¹⁶ concentrates, as the title implies, on the Ethiopian conquest and its aftermath, set against the backdrop of what is assumed to be a relatively undifferentiated pre-conquest Oromo nation. Though other Ethiopian nationalities have yet, so far as I am aware, to embark on similar projects of national construction through the

¹³ P.T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin & Alessandro Triulzi, eds., *Being and Becoming Oromo: historical and anthropological enquiries* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996).

¹⁴ Notably in the editors' 'Introduction', p.10.

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹⁶ Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993.

selective use of history, it is likely to be only a matter of time before they embark on the course already laid out by Somalis, Eritreans, and Oromos.

The construction of such ethnonationalist histories raises the question of whether 'history' in the Horn of Africa can serve as anything but the fairly crudely delineated pursuit of the intellectual and emotional basis for one political project or another, or of whether it can be divorced from the interests by which it has been captured. Is it possible, in particular, to capture the *complexities* of the region's past, rather than to succumbing to the highly simplified narratives that instrumental histories necessarily impose? Might it even be possible to write a history to which all of the region's peoples might recognise, however grudgingly, as serving no overtly political ends, and as privileging none of the region's peoples? What could such a history look like, and how could it try to tie together the different strands of which the region's past is composed, other than through the mechanisms that have been attempted in the past? This is the enquiry to which the rest of this paper will be devoted.

The Search for a Unifying History of the Horn

So what are the ingredients from which a 'new' history would have to be constructed, which seeks to integrate the histories of the different peoples of the region, without privileging any of them, or presupposing the desirability of any particular political arrangement? For a start, it could not be a history of 'Ethiopia', if that is taken to presuppose the existence of an Ethiopian state, since that state has, as already noted, covered widely different territories at different times, and its existence is precisely one of the major issues which cannot be taken for granted. It could only be, in much more general terms, a history of the 'Ethiopian region', covering areas which might or might not form part of that state at any particular time, and in practice it would have to be a history of the Horn. The Horn of Africa constitutes a distinct geographical area, broadly defined as lying between the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean on the one hand, and the present-day eastern frontiers of Sudan and Kenya on the other. The term itself carries no connotations that privilege any of the peoples within it, and the fact that the whole of it has never come within the jurisdiction of the Ethiopian empire, or indeed of any other political dispensation, divorces its history from that of any single state.¹⁷ The Horn, moreover, enjoys a unity in the sense that the fates of its different peoples, regardless of the form of rule to which they have been subjected at any particular moment, have continuously been bound up with one another. In short, the new history could only be a Horn history, in which the experiences of Afars, Tigrayans, Amharas, Oromos, Gurages, Sidamas, Somalis and many more – including, where appropriate, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Djiboutians, Somalilanders and Somalians – would be subsumed.

¹⁷ The closest that the Horn, as defined here, has ever come to incorporation within the territory of a single state was between late 1940 and May 1941, when (after the Italian conquest of British Somaliland, but before the defeat of Italy throughout the region), Italy controlled the whole of it except Djibouti. The very brevity of that episode indicates the extreme difficulties involved in turning the Horn into a single political unit.

The nearest attempt to sketch the outlines of such a history of which I am aware is Donald Levine's *Greater Ethiopia*,¹⁸ published nearly thirty years ago. Levine's project, of course, was not the same as mine, and might best be described as an attempt to integrate the conventional history of Ethiopia with a broader conception of the country's identity than the 'great tradition' approach allowed. Writing within the distinctively American tradition of cultural anthropology, Levine was concerned to classify what he terms 'greater Ethiopia' as a 'culture area',¹⁹ characterised by a number of cultural practices and assumptions, shared among a wide variety of Ethiopian peoples, that he then goes on to describe. The political project underlying this approach was however similar to that of the 'great tradition' – that of explaining and justifying the emergence of a single Ethiopian state – even though the way in which Levine approached this task was very different. The creation of modern Ethiopia is conceived, not merely as a process of expansion by which a dominant (and implicitly superior) Christian empire extended its sway over the whole of the national territory, but as a 'synthesis' of Tigrayan, Amhara and Oromo variants of a common cultural legacy, conceptualised as "an ingathering of peoples with deep historical affinities".²⁰ Though a book published on the eve of the 1974 revolution would inevitably be overtaken by events, and Levine did not anticipate the emergence (least of all among the Oromo) of ethnic political movements with explicitly separatist agendas, *Greater Ethiopia* still stands as a remarkable work of synthesis, and as a unique attempt to separate the development of a modern Ethiopian state from the ethnically specific legacies of Orthodox Christianity, imperial rule, and the Amharic language. It likewise seeks to emphasise the elements of integration in Ethiopian history, which have subsequently been ignored or straightforwardly rejected, not least as the result of the Derg regime, which by seeking to impose a highly centralised autocracy ended up by fomenting the growth of ethnic and separatist opposition. As such, it provides a valuable counterpoint to the dominant themes of subsequent historiography. It does not, however, meet the concerns of this enquiry, in part because it still serves a statist agenda (albeit with a less constricted conception of the Ethiopian state than the conventional approach permits), in part also because it still privileges specific elements of that state (even though these are extended to three peoples, Tigrayan, Amhara and Oromo, rather than the conventional two). Nor, at least in my view, can culture provide an adequate unifying theme: however heroic Levine's attempts to pull together common elements, notably as between the Oromo and the other two, it remains rather a contrived device, given force largely by a particular approach to social understanding, and ignores the massive differences even in culture between different peoples of the region.

¹⁸ Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: the evolution of a multiethnic society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.46.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.26. Though this is presented as only one conceptualisation of Ethiopia, the other being "a subjugation of alien peoples", it is clear from the argument of the book as a whole that this is the view that Levine favours.

But if the unifying theme is to be found neither in culture nor in conquest, it must be found instead in geography: in the ecological region defined by the twin plateaux bisected by the Great Rift, together with the neighbouring lowlands whose fate has necessarily been deeply affected by their intermediary position between the highlands and the sea. Even in the modern era, as witness the famines of 1973/4 and 1984/5, the region's history has been at the mercy of its physical environment, while over an infinitely longer period, the sharply contrasting environments of highland, lowland and intermediate zones have shaped the peoples, cultures and political structures of the region as a whole.

Basic Elements

A history constructed in this way draws immediate attention to four principal zones, and to the complex and often conflictual relationships between them. First, on either side of the rift, are the two zones that have historically supported dense populations of very different kinds. The first, McCann's aptly named 'People of the Plow',²¹ encompasses the familiar ox-plough grain cultivation of the northern highlands. Since this takes us straight into what has conventionally figured as 'Ethiopian' history, *tout court*, there is little need to say anything further about it here, save to point out that, inherent within the structure of the northern highland zone, are three elements with a powerful impact on the rest of the region. The first is the dynamic of fragmentation imposed by the zone's extraordinary topography, and the difficulty of projecting power across the deep ravines that separate the different densely populated plateau lands. The second, conversely, is the dynamic of expansion created by population density, the hierarchical political structures that the zone maintains, and the ideology of superiority fomented by the imperial state, Christianity, and the possession of writing. The third is the zone's varying access to the external (and especially Mediterranean) world, which has served as a barometer of its capacity to import outside resources, whether physical (like armaments) or ideological (like Christianity or the recognition of sovereign statehood) with which to reinforce its power within the region.

The second zone consists of the southern plateau and middle altitudes, broadly defined by the extent of enset cultivation, and encompassing the Gurage, Hadiya, Kaffa, Kembata, Konso, Sidama, Welaita and other southern peoples. Though they amount between them to over nine million in the 1994 census,²² these have been by far the most neglected peoples in the historiography of Ethiopia, very largely because they cannot readily be made to fit into any of the rival narratives which have been used to construct the histories of the region. Though some of them, notably Kaffa, formed states in the pre-conquest period, any such states were comprehensively destroyed during the conquest period, and most of the region was in any event governed through complex

²¹ James C. McCann, *People of the Plow: an agricultural history of Ethiopia, 1800-1990* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

²² 1994 *Population and Housing Census*, Vol.II, Table 2.14.

social arrangements that defy the overwhelming preoccupation of conventional historiography with the story of political authorities. Neither politically, culturally or territorially – in strong contrast not only to the Christian highlanders but also to the Oromo and Somali – did they seek to extend their control beyond their own core areas; and territorial expansion and retreat has been such a *leit-motiv* of history in the Horn that peoples unaffected by it drop out of the story almost by default. They scarcely figure in the imperial chronicles, and almost entirely escaped the attentions of pre-conquest European travellers to the region. Entirely included within territory that was annexed to Ethiopia during the late nineteenth century partition, they did not – unlike the Afar or Somali – come under European colonial rule, or straddle sensitive boundaries that would prompt concern in the era of decolonisation. Indeed, their external linkages of all kinds have been astonishingly slight. Nor, save very recently and to a still very limited extent, have they articulated ethnonationalist ideologies for which histories would have to be invented. If a new and ethnically neutral history of the Horn is to be written, these are the peoples whose role will require the most careful attention, and who will most obviously merit a much larger share in the narrative than they have yet received.

One particularly regrettable effect of this lacuna is to help divorce Ethiopia from its African past. The ‘great tradition’ is explicitly non-African, even anti-African: its emphasis is on connecting Ethiopia with the Christian and Semitic worlds – with the Red Sea, Arabia, and even the Mediterranean. It is no cause for surprise that many of its most distinguished exponents have been Jewish. Not only Ethiopia but the Horn as a whole are, in their narrative, in Africa but not of it. Eritrean history, of necessity, is still more markedly slanted towards linkages with Arabia, Egypt and the Mediterranean. The peoples of the south and west provide – even more than the pastoralists or the Oromo – the human links between the Horn and sub-Saharan Africa; and not until their histories have been written will we be in a position to assess the exceptionalism of the Horn.

The third zone, that of the pastoralists of the lowland peripheries, notably includes the Afar and Somali, who have achieved a relatively prominent role for many of the reasons that the southern peoples have lacked it. Incorporated at an early stage into a global religion, Islam, and with immediate access to the coast, they stood in sharp contrast to the Christian highlanders, whom they challenged both by their religion and by their strategic position between the highlands and external centres of trade and religion – thus ensuring constant (through usually violent) interaction with their neighbours. They were divided by the late nineteenth century partition between three territories in the case of the Afar, and five in that of the Somali, and hence figured prominently in the narratives of colonial powers, and in the relations between the Ethiopian empire and the surrounding territories. The one thing that they lacked – save to a very limited extent for the sultanate of Awsa – was any political structure that lent itself to narratives of statehood, but the Somali at least made up for that by their early and prominent articulation of an ethnonationalist project with few equivalents anywhere in Africa.

This leaves until last, and deliberately so, the place of the Oromo in the struc-

ture of the region as a whole. Not only are they (though only marginally) the single largest ethnic group in the Horn, they are also by a very long way the most diverse. They are – or at least until very recently have been – an *interstitial* people, filling in the gaps between the other zones, and in the process adapting themselves to the different cultures and religions of their neighbours. In Welo, they separated Afar from Amhara, formed their own quasi-feudal dynasties, and evolved a peculiarly tolerant interface between Islam and Christianity. In the Awash valley, Kereyu pastoralists were barely distinguishable from their Afar neighbours, just as in the Shoan highlands they formed a Christian peasantry who have been characterised as Oromo-speaking Amharas. In the Gibe basin, they formed small kingdoms, not so very different from Kaffa or Enaryea, while Hararge became the centre of Oromo Islam. Arsi and Welega provided further variations, while only among the Boran, in the extreme south, did they retain into the modern era the Gada system that has so fascinated anthropologists.

This variety is precisely what makes Oromo history so difficult and so important. The extant attempts to write it have proceeded by adopting one variant as a model – whether this be the Gibe states as in Mohammed Hassen's history, or the Boran as in *Being and Becoming Oromo* – and then using this as the template for the Oromo as a whole, in the process necessarily writing out of the story those millions of Oromo who fail to conform. This is history as teleology, written very much with an eye to the future: a project for what the Oromo were expected to become, rather than an observation of their behaviour in the past or present. Yet their past role – and here Levine's *Greater Ethiopia* does indeed have much to offer – has been critical to the kind of state that Ethiopia has become, and their willingness to continue to play that role is central to whether Ethiopia can remain a similar kind of state, or indeed a state at all. That some Oromo were prominent lords at court and generals in the imperial army, who conquered many other Oromos whom they incorporated into the Ethiopian empire; that some were Moslem, some Christian, and some neither; that some formed states, whereas others lived in egalitarian societies; that some were peasants, and others pastoralists – all these blurred what would otherwise have become sharp divisions between the other elements of which the Horn was composed. But at the same time, were this history of diversity to be displaced by a consciousness of solidarity, in which 'being Oromo' dissolved the linkages that Oromos have historically possessed with almost every other ethnicity in the Horn, and in which some generally accepted idea of what 'being Oromo' entailed was created, then it is hard to see how a multi-ethnic Ethiopian state would not be dissolved at the same time.

Histories of Interaction

Yet the history of the Horn is not to be written solely by dividing its peoples into different segments, even if due recognition is given to the role of the Oromo in sticking them together. It is also a history of interaction, overlay, penetration, ambivalence, and constant change, having little to do with those essentialist visions that pick out and privilege a single element in the story. Integrating the

histories of the peoples of the Horn may run counter to the political projects of the present, but remains central to understanding the past. Three linked themes appear to me to be critical to this process of integration.

The first and most obvious is the narrative of domination, through which peoples and political organisations throughout the region have constantly sought to extend their control over others. The primary theme within this narrative has then been the attempt by the rulers of the most densely populated and hierarchically organised zone within the Horn – the Christian northern highlands – to control their sparsely inhabited lowland peripheries. This is a theme that stretches back so far into the history of the region – certainly as far as the Ethiopian imperial chronicles will take us – as to render ridiculous Holcomb & Ibssa's claim that the late nineteenth century expansion of the Ethiopian state was merely the indigenous expression of European colonialism: it was instead the seizure of an opportunity provided by external developments, the import of firearms, and the re-establishment of a single source of authority within the highland zone, to pursue a long-sought project of asserting control over the empire's unruly peripheries.

But the theme of domination is by no means restricted to Amharas and Tigrayans. Both ideologically (notably in the conflict between Islam and Christianity), and economically (notably in conflicts over land and trade routes), the region has been locked into struggles over the control of scarce resources, in which the balance of advantage has lain during some periods with hierarchical state institutions, and at others with the pressures exerted by population movement and informal warfare. Almost invariably, statist forms of domination favoured the Christian empire, which alone in the region possessed the population base, structure and ideology needed for this kind of warfare; but at times, even the empire was assailed by rival organised forces, though only once from within the region (by the *jihad* of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, alias Gragn), and only occasionally from outside it (notably by the Italians, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). More significant are the processes by which the Oromo and Somali, in particular, extended their territorial control, not by state-directed warfare but through raiding, conquest and ultimate colonisation by peoples driven by demographic pressure and environmental change. Techniques of warfare likewise at some times favoured states, and at others their opponents. Indeed, part of the interest of this interaction lies in the possibility that in the current era, states may – not just in the Horn or even Africa, but throughout the world – be losing the comparative advantage that they have possessed over the past century, to the benefit of forces favouring fragmentation or local control.

But the relationships with which we must be concerned are not only ones of domination and control. Every bit as important are the processes of interaction (at times of integration or absorption) through which people learn, adapt, and establish complex and overlapping relationships with one another. These themes have been obscured or even erased by the demands both of statist and of ethnonationalist historiography, each of which privileges one particular organisation or nationality to the exclusion of elements that different peoples may

have in common. There are numerous examples of such interactions. One especially important theme – and one which I have never seen attempted – would be the examination of how and why the Oromo dispersed, culturally as well as geographically, from their initial gada system into a great variety of forms of religious belief, social organisation, and economic production. One of the great missed opportunities – though one that may well reflect the extraordinary difficulties of the project – is the way in which Mohammed Hassen's *The Oromo of Ethiopia* suddenly skips two centuries from an initial concern with the gada-driven expansions of the sixteenth century to the Gibe river states of the early nineteenth century, without so much as asking about the process by which one kind of Oromo political organisation was transformed into the other.²³

Two important elements of the answer must lie firstly in adaptations to the physical environment – always a major factor in the history of the Horn – and secondly in processes of learning from other peoples. In very many ways – religion, political organisation, the spread of crops, to name three – the history of the Horn reflects not some clash between elemental primordial groups, but the continuing construction, reconstruction and accommodation of its varied elements. The north-east to south-west trade in imported goods from Massawa and salt bars from the Danakil Depression in one direction, and in coffee, gold and other forest products in the other, tells us as much about the history of the Ethiopian region as the campaigns of Amda-Seyon, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, or Menilek II. Harar was more important as an entrepot for trade, than as a base for conquest. The ox-plough, as McCann reminds us, reached the southern and eastern highlands long before Menilek's conquering armies.²⁴ In short, the peoples of the region have a very long experience of living with one another, and have over time developed mechanisms through which to do so. This is not to imply that such mechanisms must continue to operate: Lebanon and Yugoslavia provide striking examples of the ways in which long-established structures of accommodation can collapse into ethnic bloodshed on the grand scale. But accommodation is nonetheless an important theme in the region's history, and one that does not deserve to be neglected.

The third overarching theme is the selective appropriation of externalities. The Horn has never – despite the constant repetition of Gibbon's claim that "the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten" – been insulated or isolated from neighbouring regions, either south and west into tropical Africa, or north and east to the worlds of Islam, Arabia and the Mediterranean. The ability to draw on resources from these worlds, that could then be recycled for internal use by particular domestic actors, has taken many forms. Perhaps the most important of all the external imports into the Horn, writing, was also one of the earliest. Ideology in its varied forms – whether Christianity and Islam on the one hand, or Marxism-Leninism on the other – has also been critical. All of them have served both as ideologies of rule,

²³ Asafa Jalata, *Oromia & Ethiopia*, pp.22-5, dates the supercession of gada by more hierarchical systems of rule, outside the Welo area where it can be dated earlier, to as late as the nineteenth century, but the evidence presented is generally fragmentary.

²⁴ McCann, *People of the Plow*, p.5.

and also as ideologies of resistance, depending on who appropriated them, and on the circumstances under which they did so. So have the externalities derived from foreign trade, from education, and from technologies of organisation. A possibly exaggerated emphasis has often been placed on the military uses of externality – whether in the form of imported firearms, or that of alliances with Portugal, France, Italy, Britain, the United States or the Soviet Union – to the neglect of more subtle ways in which the peoples of the Horn have absorbed and applied what was on offer from the outside world; but both firearms and external alliances have sometimes been appropriated by the agents of centralised state-formation, sometimes by their opponents.

An Attempt at Periodisation

Finally, a rewritten history of the Horn requires some periodisation, which is not merely subordinated to teleologies of state construction. This is rendered exceptionally difficult by the absence – so far as I am aware – of adequate information about the Oromo prior to the sixteenth century, and about many of the peoples of the southern and eastern zone prior to the nineteenth. Up until the sixteenth century, the history of the region is the history of the highland state, the northern and eastern peripheries, and their relationships with one another, simply because we can only sketch in the broadest terms what happened to the south and west. Even the southern boundaries of imperial rule remain extremely uncertain, though relics of pre-sixteenth century Christianity, as a marker for imperial rule, may be revealed by archaeological investigation. The story that we have to tell at this period is therefore inescapably biased towards the north-east, and encompasses the externalities derived from Christianity and Islam, writing and foreign trade, along with the ability of the highland state to maintain itself despite the loss of much of its coastline, and to extend its rule southwards, adapting itself as it did so. We can be sure that there were extensive trading relationships with peoples to the south and west, because the products turned up on the plateau, but their histories remain in shadow.

Effectively, a history of the Horn as a whole – though even then still excluding much of its southern and western periphery – can be written only from the mid-sixteenth century or so onwards; and the underlying theme of the three centuries until the mid-nineteenth century must then – at least at the level of political history – be one of fragmentation, rather than state-building. There is very little here to give much comfort to teleologies of state-formation, much to emphasise the difficulties of rule. The most familiar part of the story is of course the decline of the highland empire, from the glories that Alvares witnessed in the 1520s through to the *zämänä mäsafənt*. But over the same period, we can equally observe the collapse of any Oromo organisation or identity into scattered statelets, interspersed with stateless areas of animal husbandry, or incorporation into highland farming systems that eventually came under Christian control. The *jihad* of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim likewise failed to lead to the construction of any Islamic political structure with more than local impact.

It might well be argued, nonetheless, that the progressive decline of struc-

tures of domination between about 1550 and 1850 encouraged the development within the region of structures of accommodation, and in so doing promoted the commonalities to which Levine has drawn attention. There was no need to react against an imperial hegemony that was growing ever more feeble. The constantly competing actors within the kaleidoscope of regional politics could not look up towards any source of ultimate power, and had instead to seek alliances wherever they could find them. This process most obviously encouraged the incorporation of Oromos into the politics of the Gondarine court from the late seventeenth century onwards. Rival lords looked outside the region for assistance, from the late seventeenth century onwards. Rival lords looked outside the region for assistance, from the perspective of imperial state-formation encouraging the 'balkanisation' of Ethiopia, but from another viewpoint importing and incorporating new skills and ideas. If this period is divorced from the conventional 'great tradition' narrative of imperial decline, and looked at anew in terms of the kind of opportunities that it created, it might be used as the source of alternative narratives that could present a more diverse and complex picture of the elements that constitute the region's history.

There can however be little doubt about the overarching theme that dominates the period from roughly 1850 through to 1990: this is the imposition and decay of centralised structures of statehood. Over much of the region – Eritrea, Djibouti, British Somaliland, Somalia – this process was explicitly external, and ties the Horn into the familiar story of European colonialism throughout the continent. That this story should be subordinated to the narrative of Ethiopian independence and expansion is nonetheless entirely appropriate. Not only was the record of imperial state consolidation from the reign of Tewodros onwards quite extraordinary in its own right; it also created patterns of development in the Horn that set it sharply apart from other regions of Africa. After the failure of the Italian imperial project in 1896 – itself the result of distinctive developments within Ethiopia, every bit as much as of Italian weaknesses²⁵ – the Horn was dominated by a state that had been created in very different ways from the colonial creations that surrounded it, and which continued to behave according to a dynamic of its own. In particular, it acquired neither the institutional nor the political characteristics of colonial rule – such as a colonial bureaucracy and a domestic anti-colonial movement – and was shaped instead by the peculiar experience of 'modernisation' (or state consolidation) within a Shoan-centred empire. The distinctive features of the Ethiopian state, including the land question, the national question, the relationship with Eritrea, and the possibility of a revolution of a kind unimaginable in other parts of Africa, all derive from this legacy, which deeply affected not only Ethiopia itself, but all its regional neighbours, whose existence was predicated more than anything else on their relationship with the Ethiopian empire.

Whereas the 'great tradition' approach to Ethiopian historiography conceives of the development of the Ethiopian state after 1855 as a kind of restoration of an ancient empire – analogous in its way to the 'Solomonic restora-

²⁵ See Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

tion' of the thirteenth century – an alternative reading would see it as the precarious and very possibly temporary imposition of central rule on the fractured hinterlands of the northern plateau. It is possible, certainly, to read the story in different ways: there were indeed elements that could be interpreted as promoting that 'ingathering' which Levine identifies, just as there were also significant elements making for fragmentation. There is nothing wrong with that: indeed, one defining feature of a non-teleological history of the Horn must be that it allows for different futures, each of which may draw on aspects of the region's past. At the time of writing, nonetheless, it is clear that the process of state formation that developed in the northern highlands from the middle of the nineteenth century, and which was imposed on the remainder of the region towards the end of it, has been subject to very considerable limitations. Both in Ethiopia and in Somalia – though in distinctive ways, deriving from their very different histories and social and ecological structures – the quest for a centralised state has proved to be self-defeating, and the collapse in the same year of both the Siyad Barre and the Mengistu regimes can plausibly be regarded as marking the failure, not just of two individuals or two governments, but of projects built into the ideas of Ethiopian and Somali statehood. Nor can it in any way be assumed that the imposition of a similar centralised state structure on Eritrea, under the aegis of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, will be any less self-destructive.

Conclusion

The present time therefore provides a peculiarly opportune moment at which to write a history of the Horn that seeks to free the region from the narratives that have been imposed on it, not only by the 'great tradition' that has dominated the field, but equally by the counter-narratives – Somali, Eritrean, Oromo – with which its opponents have sought to displace it. There is *no* teleology, derived from the region's past, that can be built into its future. We are dealing, rather, with an exceedingly complex region, shaped by a great variety of overlapping and even contradictory elements, which is peculiarly unsusceptible to any attempt to reduce it to the simplified requirements of any particular political project. The very uncertainty of the present serves to undermine any pretence that such projects can be seen as deriving in any foreordained way from the region's history. The real question is then whether it is possible to write a history that does not inherently privilege any people or group of people in the region, or impose its own ideas about the future. This essay has sought to sketch out a way in which it might be done.